Chapter 5

Children into Adults, Peasants into Patriots: The Army and Nation-Building in Serbia and Bulgaria (1878–1912)

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Introduction

After the Great Eastern Crisis of 1875–1878 and the Berlin Congress of 1878, Bulgaria and Serbia respectively were acknowledged as autonomous and independent states, thus moving further out from the Ottoman political orbit. In the two countries, processes of nation-building proceeding efficiently, with army systems playing an important role: a large proportion of young men were called up and exposed to intensive training in new nationalist molds. In both countries, they were conscripted around the age of 20—I—the period that marks the transition from childhood/youth status to that of adulthood.

In Bulgaria, the conscription age was consistently lowered. Initially, youngsters were recruited after turning 21 in the calendar year previous to the recruitment, but from 1892 this age was reduced to 20, and from 1904 reduced further to 19. Thus, for example, boys born in 1885 were recruited in the spring of 1905, several months before or after turning 20 years old. Secondary school pupils and university students were conscripted after graduation. See: Article 4, “Law on Taking New Recruits in the Bulgarian Army,” Dărzhaven vestnik, 2 (89), December 6, 1880; Article 15, “Law on the Organization of the Military Forces of the Bulgarian Army,” id. 14 (36), February 15, 1892; Article 13, “Law on the Organization of the Military Forces of the Bulgarian Army,” id. 14 (18), January 24, 1904.

In Serbia, males were initially conscripted after turning 20 years in the calendar year previous to the recruitment, but in 1884 this age dropped by one year. Towards 1899, the age of conscripts was raised back up again. Thus, for example, Belgrade boys born in 1870 were conscripted in September 1890; those born in 1878, in March 1899; and those born in 1883, in August 1904. In both countries secondary school pupils and university students (a tiny minority among conscripts) were recruited after their graduation and served reduced terms of duty. See: Article 5, “Law on the Recruitment of the Permanent Army, October 23, 1872,” in Zbornik zakona i uredaba izdanih u Knjaževsu Srbiji (Belgrade: State Printing House, 25, 1872), 63; Article 3, “Law on the Organization of the Army,” Srpske novine, 50 (24), 115, February 1, 1883; “Naredba okružne komande,” Beogradske opštinske novine, 8 (33), August 5, 1890; “Objava,” Beogradske opštinske novine, 17 (9), March 7, 1899; Article 2, “Law on the Organization of the Army, January 27, 1901,” in Zbornik zakona i uredaba u Kraljevini Srbiji (Belgrade: State Printing House, 61, 1903), 92–93; “Law on the Amendment of the Law on the Organization of...
While traditional peasant societies tended to associate men’s maturity with marriage, the new Serbian and Bulgarian states started to prescribe more precise juridical definitions. The Serbian Civil Code, first adopted by the Principality of Serbia in 1844 and still in use even after the Second World War, considered all persons under 21 years as of ‘youth-age’ [mladoletni] and classified them as either ‘small children’ [under age of seven], ‘ungrown children’ [deca nedorasla, age of seven to 14] or ‘grown-up children’ [deca dorasla, above age of 14, under 21]. Similarly, Bulgaria’s 1879 Tarnovo Constitution provided political voting rights only for citizens above the age of 21. Respective provisions were also inscribed in Bulgaria’s civil law as well: a special law on guardianship defined as minors (‘underage person’) all individuals under the age of 21; the designation ‘underage children’ (nepânoletni detsa) was also used as a synonym. Minors were prohibited from controlling property or entering into property transactions, which were the responsibility of their father (or in the case of his death, of a guardian and special council of relatives, which included also the local judge). In this context, for a large portion of the population,

the Army, April 15, 1902, “Službeni vojni list,” 22 (16), April 20, 1902, 301; “Objava,” Beogradske opštinske novine, 22 (36), August 22, 1904.
2 Traditionally, family law was governed by the religious rules of the various denominations. According to the Statute of the Bulgarian Exarchate (applied over the majority Eastern Orthodox population) the minimum marriage age for boys was 20 years, and for girls 18 years. See: Article 186, Sixth Part of the “Exarchate’s Statute Adapted for the Principality of Bulgaria,” in Velichko Georgiev and Stayko Trifonov, Istoriya na bălgarite 1878–1944 v dokumenti, 1 (1) (Sofia: Prosveta, 1994), 213.
3 Article 37 in ibid., n. There were some modifications and exceptions to this rule: girls above the age of 18 could marry without consent of the parents (Article 150); boys above the age of 17 could be proclaimed adults by a court after a personal and parental application, but even in this case the law instructed judges to consider if there were essential grounds for such a decision: ‘the male [person] is wedded, maintains own house, regularly runs craft or trade, or has received a position in the public service with a regular salary’ (Article 152, Ibid., 51–52).
5 “Law on Guardianship,” Dârzhaven vestnik, 12 (67), 1–5, March 24, 1890. See especially Articles 1–3 and 14–15. The law provided that above 18 years of age, in some cases “an underage person” could be put under milder form of supervision (popechitelstvo); he could use profits from his property, but still not sell it or use it for credit without the approval of the council of relatives (Articles 100–111). Other important childhood-related civic legal acts were the “Law on Acknowledgement of Illegitimate Children, of their Legitimization and on Adoptions,” Dârzhaven vestnik, 12 (9), January 12, 1890, and the “Law on Inheritance,” Dârzhaven vestnik, 12 (20), January 25, 1890.